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Debunking Donald Trump's '20 Favorite Books on China'



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In 2015, Peter Navarro was a mere economics professor at the University of California, Irvine, and the author of a few books espousing an extreme trade stance on China. In 2016, he became the chief economics advisor to then-candidate Donald Trump. Today he serves as the Assistant to the President, Director of Trade and Industrial Policy, and the Director of the White House National Trade Council.

Last August, in an [interview with KPBS San Diego](#), Navarro told a story of how he first came to meet Trump:

“In 2011, this L.A. Times smart-ass reporter interviewed Trump and asked him what are your favorite books on China. The agenda there was to catch him in a Sarah Palin moment; he expected Trump to go ‘Eh, I read all of them’. What Trump did was he proceeded to reel off I think it was fifteen books about China, ranked them from top to bottom, gave praises of each one them in some detail and mine, my first book *The Coming China*

Exhibit A

Wars, was number six on his list, in other words I made his Top Ten. And so at that point I saw that article and I began corresponding with Hope Hicks and his media people and he was kind enough in 2011 and 2012 to write a nice testimonial for my Death by China book, it was first a book and then a documentary film.”

The May 3, 2011 L.A. Times piece that Navarro was attempting to describe reported that in an interview with Xinhua, the official press agency of the People’s Republic of China, Trump had stated “I’ve read hundreds of books about China over the decades...I know the Chinese. I’ve made a lot of money with the Chinese. I understand the Chinese mind.” And that, when asked to identify his favorite books about China, Trump “reportedly listed the following 20 books right off the top of his head.” The list included such books as *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and also, at #6, Peter Navarro’s *The Coming China Wars*.

Donald Trump has read a lot of books on China: 'I understand the Chinese mind'

MAY 3, 2011 | 4:05 PM

Donald Trump recently reeled off an impressive list of Chinese books that he has read over the years that has helped him understand the nation and people that he does business with.

"I've read hundreds of books about China over the decades," Trump told Xinhua, the official news agency of the People's Republic of China.

"I know the Chinese. I've made a lot of money with the Chinese. I understand the Chinese mind," said the billionaire, who has continually stated that if he were president he would levy a [25% tax on Chinese imports](#).

Asked to name any of his favorite tomes on China, Trump reportedly listed the following 20 books right off the top of his head.

1. "The Party" by Richard McGregor
2. "On China" by Henry Kissinger
3. "Mao: The Untold Story" by Jung Chang
4. "Tide Players" by Jianying Zha
5. "One Billion Customers" by James McGregor
6. "The Coming China Wars" by Peter W. Navarro



Perhaps because this story is at odds with Trump's characterization as not being much of a reader (during the 2016 campaign he once stated that his favorite book was the Bible, and his second favorite was his own *The Art of the Deal*), it has become an anecdote cited by a number of credible news organizations in the six years since. [U.S. News and World Report](#) profiled several of the books, [Slate](#) referenced it in a recent article (albeit with a "reportedly" qualifier), and the [Washington Post](#) has cited it as fact [at least twice](#). The "I've read hundreds of books about China" line has appeared in articles from [CBS News](#), [Politico](#), and the [BBC](#).

And it's complete fiction.

There never was a Xinhua interview that Trump gave about China in April 2011. He didn't make those statements or say "I've read hundreds of books about China" or "I understand the Chinese mind." And, unsurprisingly, he did not, off the top of his head, list twenty books about China and their authors.

Virtually every story about this supposed interview invariably links back not to Xinhua itself, but to the L.A. Times blog post. Which, in turn, claims the information came from a Trump interview with Xinhua, but provides no more specifics than that. No link, no citation, not even a date. When asked on Twitter in December 2016 about his source, L.A. Times blogger Tony Pierce admitted he couldn't remember it, and simply pointed out that he'd credited Xinhua. One website claimed in 2011 that the Xinhua article "was immediately pulled offline by Communist censors (purportedly because it mentioned banned books...)", but there's no evidence of that either. It's not that there are dead links to the phantom interview; there are no links to it whatsoever, live or dead, nor any specific information as to where or when it ran.

Peter Navarro also wasn't the only person on the list to take it seriously. The earliest reference at all to the "interview" that I could locate was a self-congratulatory April 26, 2011 Facebook post by Richard McGregor, the author of the first book on the fake list. Three days later, Blacksmith Books, the publisher of the #10 book was bragging about its mention on Twitter, and was still bragging on its website as recently as last November.

As these predated the L.A. Times blog post, they cited different sources for the story. Blacksmith linked to a self-published CNN iReport article from

April 28, 2011, credited to “chinabooks.” Articles at iReport are user-submitted, and not created or factchecked by CNN. This particular article remains the only submission by “chinabooks”, whose bio page states “Zhou Lu is the manager of China Books. He specializes in retail and distribution of western-published books in Mainland China.” The iReport is twice labeled “Not Verified by CNN.”

583
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About this iReport

- Not verified by CNN



Posted April 28, 2011 by chinabooks

Location
Beijing, China

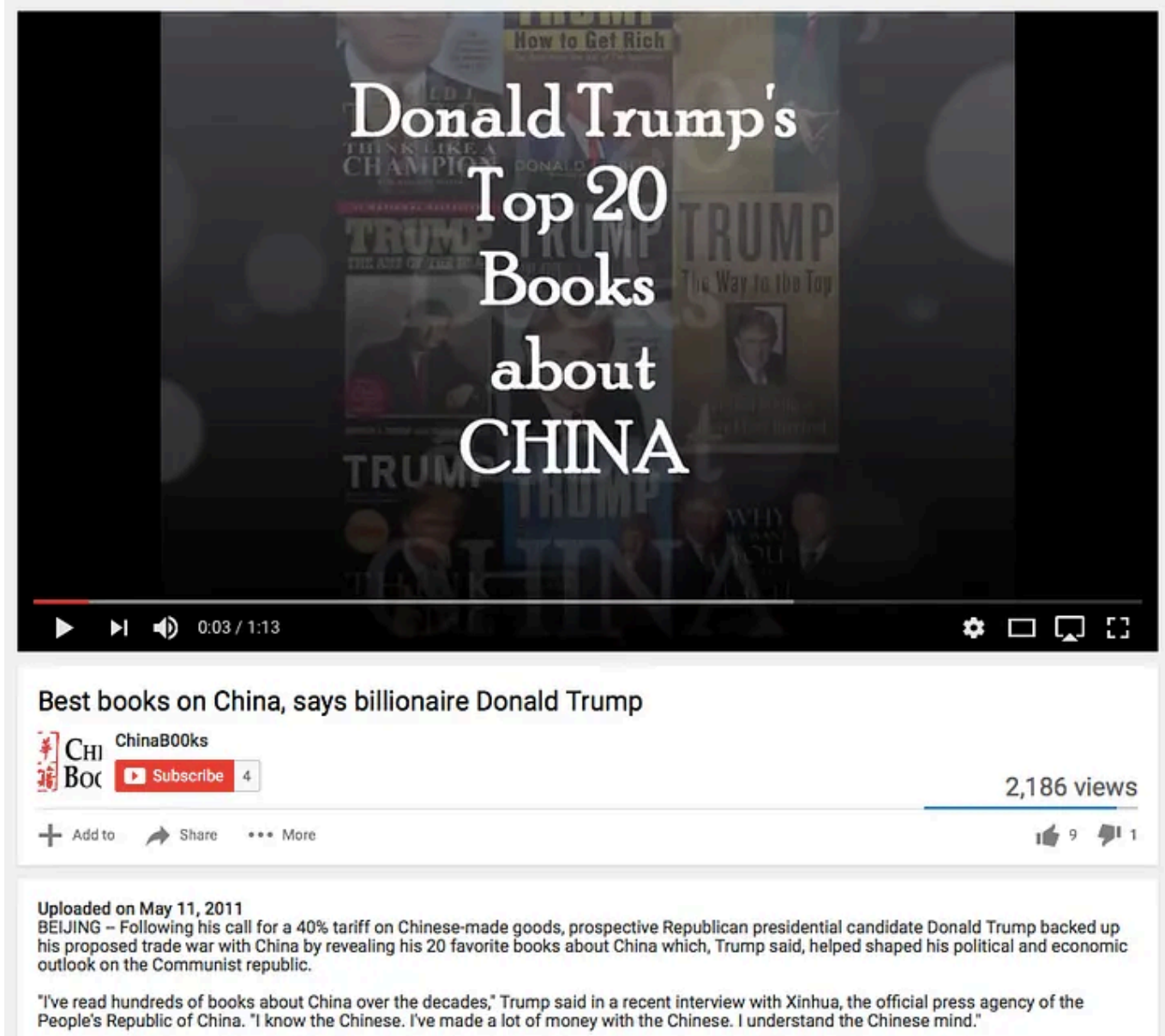
McGregor's "Party", Hessler's "Driving" make Trump's China reading list

By chinabooks | Posted April 28, 2011 | Beijing, China

McGregor similarly linked not to Xinhua, but to a since-deleted article at PRLog.com, a free press release website. This same press release was the source for nearly every other tweet about the “interview” in late April 2011, including the very first one, and tweets from correspondents for Bloomberg and the New York Times. Even if Tony Pierce cannot remember the source he used for his blog post at the L.A. Times, it seems probable that he was introduced to it via Twitter.



That PRLog press release may no longer be available, but McGregor's Facebook post helpfully preserved its opening sentences: "American billionaire presidential candidate Donald Trump proposes trade war with China, backs up opinion with reading list of 20 favorite books on China." And those sentences are identical to the title caption of an April 26, 2011 free press release posted at Newswire. Moreover, the body of the Newswire press release is identical to the body of the CNN iReport article. And the Newswire page carries the label "An Official Press Release from China Books."



Zhou Lu's name appears again as the press contact on the Newswire press release, but he did not respond to a request for comment for this article. (Nor did Peter Navarro, the Trump Organization, or the White House.) China Books also has a YouTube account with a single video, posted May 11, 2011, titled "Best books on China, says billionaire Donald Trump."

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There appears to be no reference to the Xinhua “interview”, Trump’s list of books on China, or even his supposed quotes about China prior to April 26, 2011, the date of China Books’ first two press releases.

This is also not a matter of there being a translation barrier and Chinese publications that are inaccessible to the English reader. Chinese factcheckers already concluded this story was fabricated, and published their findings in December of last year, well before some of its more recent references in the American news media. (English translation.)

To his credit, Mr. Trump appears to have never commented publicly on the book list, or to have directly or indirectly lent it any credence. At the same time, neither he nor the Trump Organization appears to have ever called it out as being false. (Although, as noted above, they also did not respond to e-mailed queries on the subject.)

Which in turn is what makes Mr. Navarro’s story so singular. He is now a member of the Trump Administration, and he claimed in not just the KPBS interview, but in multiple interviews and articles, that this fake list was what first brought him and Donald Trump together. (Notably, prior to the above interviews, Navarro was very cagey about how he first came to know Trump, so perhaps Vanity Fair was onto something with its report that Jared Kushner discovered Navarro via Amazon.com.) Did Trump not correct Navarro to say that the list wasn’t real? Did Trump continue to pretend it was real, even with one of the authors?

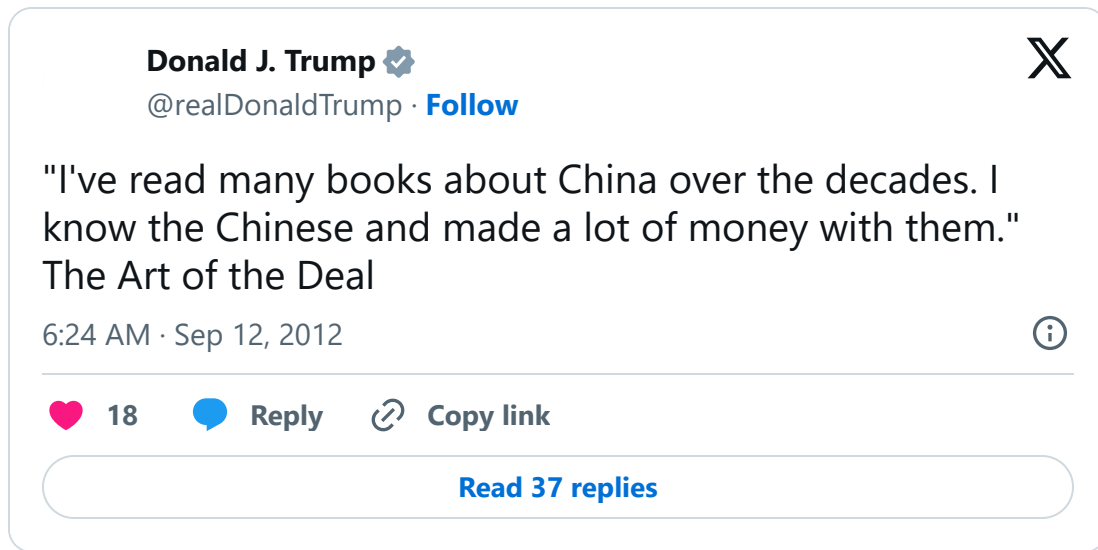
That said, there is reason to doubt much of Navarro’s own story. Most obviously, he incorrectly claims the interview was conducted by an L.A.

Times reporter, and goes so far as to ascribe a motivation to the reporter. He claims that he began corresponding with Hope Hicks in 2011, but she did not join the Trump Organization until 2014, and was not made part of Trump's communications team until 2015. Moreover, there's no evidence that a Trump testimonial for Navarro's *Death by China* documentary film existed prior to March 2016, and there's no evidence that a testimonial for the book exists at all.

Navarro's DeathbyChina.com website prominently displays its Trump endorsement at the top ("DEATH BY CHINA is right on. This important documentary depicts our problem with China with facts, figures and insight. I urge you to see it." — Donald Trump), but according to Archive.org, the site was first edited to add that quote not in 2011 or 2012, but sometime between March 7 and March 29, 2016, mere days before Navarro publicly praised and endorsed Trump's candidacy.

Then again, it wouldn't be uncharacteristic of Trump to continue to use a story he knows to be fake to further his interests. In fact, he's already done so at least once with this very story. Just not the list of books aspect.

Because on September 12, 2012, Donald Trump tweeted "'I've read many books about China over the decades. I know the Chinese and made a lot of money with them.' The Art of the Deal".



Except those words aren't Donald Trump's and they didn't appear in *The Art of the Deal*, or in any other Trump book or speech. Rather, they first appeared in a series of fabricated press releases written by a Chinese book salesman. Donald Trump either can't tell the difference between a hoax and his "second favorite book of all time", a book with his own name on the cover, or he didn't care.

So the world can stop pretending that Donald Trump is a voracious reader who can rattle off book titles and authors on a moment's notice. It can instead remind itself that he is a man who, when asked by Megyn Kelly if he read and to name the most recent book he'd read, responded "Oh, no, it's so long, because now I read passages. I read — I read areas, I read chapters. I just — I don't have the time. You know, when was the last time I watched a baseball game? I'm watching you all the time, okay?"

Donald Trump isn't a man who has twenty favorite books on China. He probably doesn't have twenty favorite books, period. He's a man who responds to the question of "What was the last book you read?" by saying he watches TV "all the time."

- Loren Collins is an Atlanta attorney and the author of *Bullspotting: Finding Facts in the Age of Misinformation*.
- Originally published at [Bullspotting.com](https://bullspotting.com).

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